

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 11, 2005

For More Information Contact

Jimeequa Williams (804) 864-7897

**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH STRESSES IMPORTANCE OF
RABIES VACCINATIONS FOR PETS**

(Richmond, Va.)—The Virginia Department of Health is reminding residents that they play an essential role in preventing the spread of rabies. Rabies Awareness Week kicks off on January 16, 2005, and the state health department is encouraging pet owners to mark this date by making sure their companion animals' rabies vaccinations are up-to-date.

"Keeping our pets' vaccinations current is a responsibility all pet owners must understand," stressed State Health Commissioner Robert B. Stroube, M.D., M.P.H. "This accountability not only protects the health of the companion animals but also addresses the safety of our families and communities."

In Virginia the total number of animal rabies cases confirmed through December 18, 2004 was 460. The majority of rabies cases reported in Virginia occurred in raccoons, but it is rabid dogs and cats that usually expose humans to this deadly disease.

"We often see rabies in wild animals, such as raccoons and skunks, as well as in feral cats. So it's very important for people to avoid contact with wildlife and cats and dogs that they don't know," explained Suzanne Jenkins, V.M.D., M.P.H., Acting State Epidemiologist. Dr. Jenkins reminds people who feed or care for stray or feral animals that unless they take the steps to vaccinate those animals they could be putting themselves and their own companion animals at risk for exposure to rabies. "If you care enough to feed them, you should care enough to have them vaccinated as well," Dr. Jenkins said.

The rabies virus is shed in the saliva of animals sick with the virus, so any animal bite should be taken seriously. If an animal bites you, wash the wound immediately. Call your physician, local health department or animal control agency immediately. Likewise, if a wild animal bites your pet, contact your veterinarian or local health department immediately.

The health department strongly advises people to follow this guidance to prevent families and pets from being exposed to rabies:

- Vaccinate all cats, dogs and ferrets against rabies and keep the vaccinations up-to-date!
- Avoid contact with wild animals or stray cats and dogs.
- Do not feed wild animals or stray cats and dogs.
- Report stray animals to your local animal control agency.
- Eliminate outdoor food sources around the home.
- Keep pets confined to your property or walk them on a leash.

State law requires all dogs and cats over the age of four months to be vaccinated against rabies. Vaccines can be given as early as three months and several products are approved for kittens at eight weeks. Dog licenses are required throughout the state and some communities require licenses for cats.

Rabies Awareness Week is sponsored by the Virginia Department of Health, Virginia Veterinary Medical Association, Virginia Federation of Humane Societies and Virginia Animal Control Association. For more information on rabies, log onto the Virginia Department of Health's Web site at www.vdh.virginia.gov/whc/external_whc/rabiesnew.asp or the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Web site at www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rabies/default.htm.